function on the characteristic values of the users of the plurality of users related to the particular user.

2. The method of claim 1, wherein the electronic community is a community for the buying and selling of merchandise over a network.

3. The method of claim 2 wherein the network comprises the internet.

4. The method of claim 1, wherein the characteristic value is based on feedback received from other users of the plurality of users in the electronic community.

5. The method of claim 4, wherein the feedback is received from other users who have bought or sold goods or services with the particular user.

6. The method of claim 1, wherein the set of relationships includes sponsorship relationships between the particular user and any users of the plurality of users that were sponsored by the particular user.

7. The method of claim 6, wherein the relationships of the plurality of users can be represented as one or more n-ary trees.

8. The method of claim 6, wherein information concerning the relationships between the plurality of users is stored in data structures for each user of the plurality of users.

9. The method of claim 8, wherein the data structure for the particular user contains a pointer to at least one user of the plurality of users that was sponsored by the particular user.

10. The method of claim 1, wherein a recursive routine is used in determining a community rating for the particular user.

11. The method of claim 10, wherein the community rating and the characteristic values are numerical.

12. (Once Amended) The method of claim 11, wherein the community rating is an aggregate of the characteristic value for each user of the plurality of users that is a lineal descendant of the particular user and the characteristic value of the particular user.

13. (Once Amended) A method comprising:

maintaining reputation value on each user of a plurality of users within an electronic trading community through which goods and services are bought and sold, the reputation value being derived for a particular user of the plurality of users from feedback received concerning the particular user from other users of the plurality of users;

maintaining a set of relationships between the plurality of users, the set of relationships including sponsorship relationships between the particular user and any users of the plurality of users that were sponsored by the particular user, where the set of relationships for a particular user can be represented as an n-ary tree;

deriving a community rating for the particular user by aggregating the reputation value for each user of the plurality of users that is related to the particular user through a linear sponsorship succession as can be represented by the n-ary tree in which the particular user is the root of the n-ary tree.

14. A computer-readable medium having computer-executable instructions for performing a method in a computer system for determining a community rating for a particular user of a plurality of users within an electronic community comprising:

maintaining a characteristic value for a each user of the plurality of users;

maintaining a set of relationships between the plurality of users; and

deriving a community rating for the particular user by performing a function on the characteristic values of the users of the plurality of users related to the particular user.

15. The computer-readable medium of claim 14, wherein the electronic community is a community for the buying and selling of merchandise using an electronic forum.

16. The computer-readable medium of claim 15, wherein the characteristic value is based on feedback received from other users of the plurality of users in the electronic community.

17. The computer-readable medium of claim 16, wherein the set of relationships includes sponsorship relationships.

18. (Once Amended) The computer-readable medium of claim 17, wherein the community rating and the characteristic values are numerical, and the community rating is an aggregate of the characteristic value for each user of the plurality of users that is a lineal descendant of the particular user and the characteristic value of the particular user derived using a recursive routine.

19. A computer system for determining a community rating for a particular user of a plurality of users within an electronic community comprising:

a storage device having stored therein information and data relating to one or more sets of relationships between a plurality of users of an electronic community, one or more characteristic values for each user of the plurality of users, and one or more routines for determining one or more community ratings based on the characteristic values of each user of the plurality of users and the relationships between the plurality of users; and

a processor coupled to the storage device for executing the one or more routines to derive the one or more community ratings.

20. The computer system of claim 19 further comprising a network interface connected with a communications network over which data and information related to and including the one or more characteristic values

and one or more community values for each user of the plurality may be transmitted.